

2008 Farm Bill—Federal Assistance Programs for Landowners

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides many support programs that family and individual landowners can use to conserve their working land. The programs provide expert technical advice and often include financial assistance for landowners who use specific management practices. Some programs also offer rental payments to offset income losses due to changes in land use.

These are voluntary programs—property owners choose the program that most closely matches their management goals, such as improving wildlife habitat or restoring a wetland. The Natural Resources Conservation Service administers many of the programs, and the U.S. Forest Service and Farm Service Agency manage other programs.

Crop, livestock, and forestry programs are included in the summary that follows, since many properties have mixed uses.

Forest Legacy Program (FLP)

Administered by: U.S. Forest Service

Goal: Encourage protection of working private forests

The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) provides a way to ensure that traditional land uses continue into the future. The program supports a State's effort to maintain options for forest resource management in the future.

FLP is a highly competitive program, with each State allowed only three projects per year to be recommended for support.

The Forest Legacy Program functions by acquiring conservation easements from landowners—legal agreements that transfer certain property rights from one party to another. Typically, these easements restrict development and require the landowner to maintain sustainable forestry practices.

The Forest Legacy Program is a partnership between the U.S. Forest Service and individual States. A contact list of Forest Service and State Forest Legacy Program coordinators is available at http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/library/flp_all_contacts.pdf.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Administered by: Farm Service Agency

Goal: Protect topsoil from erosion

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) provides assistance to landowners with cropland. The program strives to improve the water quality of pond, lake, stream, and river watersheds by reducing water runoff and sedimentation.

Landowners can receive additional assistance to replant their acreage in approved cover. The cover planting option makes the program a major contributor in increasing wildlife habitat in many parts of the country. Conservation Reserve Program contracts last for 10 or 15 years.

Through the CRP, landowners receive annual rental payments and cost-share assistance for enrolling eligible land. The program makes yearly rental payments to landowners in exchange for converting erosion-prone land from annual crops, such as corn, to grass or tree cover for long-term resource protection.

The Farm Service Agency administers the CRP in cooperation with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Cooperative State Research and Education Service, State foresters, and local soil and water conservation districts. Visit <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?state=us&agency=fsa> to locate a Farm Service Agency office or go to <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=crp> for more information.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

Administered by: Farm Service Agency (FSA)

Goal: Protect environmentally sensitive land, decrease erosion, restore wildlife habitat, and safeguard ground and surface water

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is similar to the CRP. CREP has many of the same enrollment requirements, but also a few differences. Landowners can enroll in CREP at any time instead of during specific signup periods. However, CREP is not available in all areas. States limit enrollment to specific geographic areas and practices, so landowners need to contact their local Farm Service Agency office to see if they are located in a CREP program area.

CREP also includes a land enhancement portion; in addition to paying the annual rental rate, the program pays up to 50 percent of the cost of installing enhancement projects. The program also offers a signup incentive for installing specific practices. More information is available on the Web at: [http:// www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=cep](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=cep).

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Administered by: Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Service Agency (FSA)

Goal: Promote agricultural production, forest management, and environmental quality as compatible goals

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides assistance to individuals involved in forest management or agricultural production who have soil, water, air, or related natural resource concerns about their land.

The program is used to promote multiple priorities, including reducing nonpoint source pollution, reducing groundwater contamination, conserving ground and surface water, reducing

emissions of particulate matter and nitrogen oxides (NO_x), reducing soil erosion and sedimentation, and promoting habitat conservation for at-risk species. As a result, EQIP can differ among States and even among counties.

Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pasture, private forest land, and other farm or ranch lands.

NRCS has responsibility for establishing program policies, procedures, and priorities, including the costshare and incentive payment limits and the eligibility of specific practices. The FSA has responsibility for the administrative processes and procedures for applications, contracting, and financial matters, including program allocation and accounting.

Visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/> to learn more about EQIP.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

Administered by: Natural Resources Conservation Service

Goal: Develop upland, wetland, riparian, and aquatic wildlife habitat areas

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) encourages the creation of quality habitat that supports wildlife populations of national, State, Tribal, and local significance.

Under the program, NRCS works with a landowner to create a wildlife habitat development plan. NRCS provides cost-share payments to landowners through agreements that usually last for 5 to 10 years, depending upon the practices to be installed. NRCS offers short-term agreements to install practices that address wildlife emergencies. Short-term agreements require the approval of the NRCS State Conservationist.

NRCS also provides greater cost-share assistance to landowners who enter into agreements of 15 years or more for practices that create essential plant and animal habitat. Landowners can enroll land in the program as long as they own or have control of the land for the duration of the agreement period. Landowners can submit enrollment applications at any time during the year.

NRCS administers the program by working with a variety of partners, including the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; U.S. Forest Service; Environmental Protection Agency; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; State foresters; and State fish and wildlife agencies.

Visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/whip/> for more information.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

Administered by: Natural Resources Conservation Service

Goal: Restore, enhance, and protect wetlands

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) encourages landowners to retire marginal land from agricultural production through financial incentives. The program offers three enrollment options: permanent easement, 30-year easement, and restoration cost-share agreement.

Under the permanent easement option, NRCS pays the lowest of three amounts: the agricultural value of the land, an established payment cap, or an amount offered by the owner. In addition, the USDA pays 100 percent of the cost to restore the wetland. The 30-year easement pays 75 percent of the permanent easement value and 75 percent of restoration costs.

NRCS considers three factors when determining WRP allocations: ecological considerations regarding the number of wetlands lost in a State and whether the State impacts migratory birds, landowner interest in the program as reflected by the level of unfunded applications, and State performance related to prior year WRP activity.

Eligible land for enrollment in the WRP includes wetlands cleared or drained for farming, pasture, or timber production; lands adjacent to restorable wetlands that contribute to wetland functions and values; restored wetlands that need long-term protection; drained wooded wetlands where hydrology will be restored; existing or restorable riparian habitat corridors that connect protected wetlands; and lands substantially altered by flooding where wetland restoration at a reasonable cost is likely.

Landowners can submit enrollment applications at any time during the year through NRCS. Visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/wrp/> for more information.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)

Administered by: Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency

Goal: Restore and protect grasslands

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) supports working grazing operations; enhancement of plant and animal biodiversity; and protection of grassland and land containing shrubs and forbs under threat of conversion to crop production, urban development, and other activities that threaten grassland resources.

GRP allows landowners to continue grazing practices. The program also allows haying, mowing, or harvesting for seed production with certain restrictions during nesting season. Landowners can conduct appropriate fire rehabilitation and construct firebreaks and fences.

The program has three enrollment options: permanent easement, 30-year easement, and rental agreement. Landowners can also choose a rental agreement as an alternative to an easement. NRCS offers 10-, 15-, 20-, and 30-year rental agreements. Eligible land includes privately owned and Tribal lands that contain forbs or shrubs, or land located in areas historically dominated by grassland, forbs, or shrubs that has the potential to serve as wildlife habitat.

Visit <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=grp> for more information.